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The Journal of Development Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fjds20

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To cite this article: Jon Harald Sande Lie (04 Mar 2024): Public–Private Development Cooperation: Interface and Conflicting Logics in the Formation of a Strategic Partnership, The Journal of Development Studies, DOI: 10.1080/00220388.2024.2323016

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2024.2323016

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Published online: 04 Mar 2024.

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The Journal of Development Studies, 2024
Vol. 0, No. 0, 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2024.2323016

Public–Private Development Cooperation: Interface and Conflicting Logics in the Formation of a Strategic Partnership

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(Original version submitted May 2023; final version accepted February 2024)

ABSTRACT *Public–private development partnership constitutes the core of a deepening normative agenda that places private actors as active development agents and as means through which other development objectives are pursued in partnership with publicly funded aid actors. This normative agenda may challenge international development. This article goes beyond the official policy level to explore the formation of public–private development cooperation in practice, not just on paper. It zooms into the partnership between a Norwegian NGO and a multinational company and their joint project to renovate an old vocational college in Ethiopia to serve the private actor's need for qualified workers. The article shows how a publicly funded development project becomes a proxy for private interests, but argues that the diversion of public aid is not due to bad intentions or conflicting interests. Rather, it is the result of interface situations created by the public–private partnership agenda and its intentional merger of actors with distinct institutional logics, accountabilities and rationales. The article demonstrates how actors put together as part of the public–private partnership agenda end up undermining the agenda itself because of the interface situations created in the nexus of public and private actors.*

KEYWORDS: public–private partnership; interface; NGO; development cooperation; private sector development; Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Public–private partnerships in international development may be challenged and even undermined by the practices and relations produced by the public–private partnership policy agenda and the partners it brings together. This article explores a particular public–private development partnership in Ethiopia between a multinational corporation and a Norwegian NGO, which have received funding for a joint project. While contractual agreements are vital in establishing such partnerships, this article goes beyond what happens on paper to explore the details of how relations between public and private actors operate in practice. The case demonstrates how public donor funds end up being used to serve private interests, not because of actors' bad

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intentions or conflicting interests. Rather, the public–private partnership produces situations of interface (Long, 1989, 2001), making the partnership akin to a knowledge battlefield (Lie, 2019) where the public and private actors' distinct institutional rationale and logic meet and rub shoulder with each other – having the consequence that PPP in development creates situations that undermine PPP itself.

Over the past decade, private actors and large corporations have entered the field of international development on an unprecedented scale. This has the consequence that the 'landscape of international development is shifting to radically (re)centre the private sector as the engine of development' (Hart, Russon, & Sklair, 2021; McEwan, Mawdsley, Banks, & Scheyvens, 2017, p. 49). The private sector now constitutes the core of a deepening normative discourse that recasts private actors as active development agents and as means through which other development objectives are pursued in partnership with traditional development actors (Bayliss & van Waeyenberge, 2018; Hart et al., 2021; Mawdsley, 2014; Pérez-Pineda & Wehrmann, 2021) – as illustrated by e.g. 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which encourage the formation of public–private partnerships (PPP) for development. These changes, which mark a shift from the Washington to the Wall Street Consensus (Gabor, 2021), present international development with new dynamics, opportunities and challenges. The main opportunity, which constitutes the overarching rationale of involving private actors, relates to finances and the mobilisation of much needed private funds for international development, in particular large-scale infrastructure projects and to realise the development objectives inherent to the SDGs (Cohen, Godfrey, Jeune, & Kindornay, 2021; Fabre & Straub, 2023). Here, official development assistance is used to promote partnerships between public and private actors and to leverage private finance by providing joint projects involving blended finance and by de-risking private investments by using public guarantees. Public–private development cooperation is, however, not only about attracting private money to public projects. The private sector logics of competition and market orientation are also seen to improve the effectiveness, feasibility, relevance and local sensitivity of aid programmes (Cohen et al., 2021) whether implemented by international organisations, state actors or the third sector, such as NGOs.

There are also risks and challenges to public–private development cooperation that are largely caused by the intentional partnership and interface (Long, 2001) of public and private actors that have their distinct mandates and competing logics. First, public–private development cooperation may challenge the established governing principles of aid – such as local ownership, participatory approaches, mutual accountability – since private actors are not 'expected to abide by the same principles of development effectiveness, for example, imposed by the OECD' (McEwan et al., 2017, p. 49). There are concerns that 'in their efforts to engage the private sector, donors will relax the linkage between their official development assistance (ODA) and the principles of development effectiveness' (Cohen et al., 2021, p. 947). Second, it raises concern about what is considered as the legitimate balance between public and private interests in international development, and how private sector priorities and interests are balanced with nationally determined development plans and aid actors' own mandates. There are concerns that private actors merely repackage existing practices in line with new expectations, that they cherry-pick development projects and policies already in line with their own, and that they decouple their development activities from their core business (Gneiting & Mhlanga, 2021), where the public–private partnership merely serves as a cosmetic label. Third, public–private partnerships in international development run the risk of diverting public aid to serve private interests (Gabor, 2021; Hart et al., 2021; Romero & Van Waeyenberge, 2020). This article supports this claim, which is not uncommon, but for somewhat other reason than the usual reference to how private actors' interests and rent-seeking activities seek to profit from public partnerships and funds. Rather, this article demonstrates that the public–private partnership creates knowledge encounters and interface situations between different actors with distinct institutional cultures and logics that are hard to reconcile in practice. Private sector engagement in development thus creates situations where donor funds are used to promote private interests, but not necessarily because of bad will or intentions, but because of the incommensurability of the distinct actors and logics put together by the public–private partnership itself. As such, the policy of PPP instigates practices and interfaces that may end up undermining PPP itself.

This article explores the formation and dynamics of a particular public–private development partnership in Ethiopia, showing how it works in practice and not only on paper. The partnership is between a Norwegian NGO and multinational fertilizer company cooperating over a development project aimed at renovating a vocational training college in northern Ethiopia. The background is that the fertilizer company is on the verge of establishing a huge potash mine, but needs skilled local labour to build and operate it. Their joint project has received funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) under its newly established 'strategic partnership' programme, which was set-up in response to global policy demands to enhance the cooperation between public and private actors in international development. The strategic partnership between the NGO and the multinational company thus represents an éclatant case to explore situations of interface (Long, 1989, 2001) by focusing on what happens in the practical encounter of actors with different logics, interests, material resources, and practices. The article draws on several, shorter and multisited fieldworks comprising (participant) observation and interviews, as well as review of policy documents and other forms of grey literature. Research includes five fieldtrips to Ethiopia over a three-year period starting in 2017, comprising 27 unstructured interviews and focused conversations with various stakeholders representing relevant public, private and civil society actors in Addis Ababa, Mekelle, Abala and Dallol. I have participated in and observed project inception workshops, meetings, and visited the different project sites in Abala and Dallol several times. This has been complemented with interviews and observations in Norway among private sector and development actors, both governmental and non-governmental – thus enabling to trace and explore the context specific renderings of the ubiquitous private sector policy in international development and the interface dynamics departing from these encounters. The article first outlines some general practitioner and scholarly concerns and debates pertaining to the role of private actors in international development. Second, it outlines the theoretical and analytical dimensions: in drawing on knowledge sociology and the extended case study method, this article employs the interface concept (Long, 1989) to grasp the knowledge encounters and practical effects of public–private development cooperation. The third section attends to the formation of the 'strategic partnership' programme of Norwegian aid, before the fourth and main section zooms into the practical renderings of the strategic partnership in Northern Ethiopia (see Lie, 2022).

2. The public and the private in international development

Relations between public and private actors in the development domain are far from new, and historically it has been an ambiguous and contentious one. Development assistance is first and foremost a public endeavour, in being based on or subsidized by public monies, provided by or to official agencies or their executives on a not-for profit and concessional basis, with the aim to promote the economic development and welfare of aid receiving countries. In this, the role designated the private sector has been subject to political and ideological shifts, transitioning from an indirect, passive and immanent role in which aid was used to push for policy reforms to liberalise the private sector space; to a more direct and intentional role where private actors collaborate actively with development actors (Di Bella, Grant, Kindornay, Tissot, & Slahub, 2013).

The role of the private sector in international development can be grouped into three broad categories, which also marks a historical trajectory (ibid.). First is how private actors operate *in* development, meaning that corporations' regular activities may have implications for and effects on development outcomes, such as economic growth, poverty reduction and job creation. Second, private sector development refers to how international development actors, notably the International Financial Institutions during the structural adjustment area, used conditionality approaches to promote privatisation and liberalisation to stimulate private actors' operations and investments. Third is the role of the private sector *for* development, in the sense that companies are operating in the name of development, actively pursuing development objectives and increasingly cooperating, in joint partnership, with established publicly-funded development actors (ibid., Lie, 2022; McEwan et al., 2017). So, while private actors' role in development is not new, the latter notion reflects the most recent shift. This shift goes beyond the traditional notion of PPP, referring to the outsourcing of the neoliberal state where private actors implement public projects against a long-term public repayment plan (Romero & Van Waeyenberge, 2020). Rather, the more recent shift is about how private actors increasingly have come to operate in the name of development through partnership with traditional and publicly funded aid agencies, thus bringing together actors with different interests and distinct institutional logics for the same project. Such partnerships were until just recently conceived of as unthinkable and even illegitimate by aid actors themselves. Now, however, they increasingly constitute a new normal where publicly funded aid programmes are expected to benefit from the purported attributes of the private sector – as illustrated by e.g. the OECD–DAC Busan Declaration on aid effectiveness, the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs (Mawdsley, Savage, & Kim, 2014; OECD-DAC, 2011).

The role and relevance of the private sector to development have over the last two decades gradually become more overt in line with the unfolding of a '… wider neoliberal discourse about economic growth, prosperity and well-being. A vibrant private sector with well-functioning markets is seen as the *sine qua non* of a properly developing country' (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014, p. 24). The World Bank – which holds an authoritative role defining the legitimate balance between public and private interests in international development – has taken the lead in promoting efforts of greater public–private partnerships in the developing world, 'to spur growth and fight poverty' through larger infrastructure projects, with growing support of other bi- and multilateral agencies, as well as national governments (Bayliss & van Waeyenberge, 2018). Activities of northern businesses in the global south proliferated with the ideological shifts, market access and economic globalisation serving as pull factors – complemented by the push factors of e.g. demands to demonstrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) and companies' need for cheap labour (Rajak, 2011). Private sector activities were detached from the development apparatus, but still seen as unintentionally conducive to immanent development processes. The detachment meant that business actors lacked regulation and accountability for their development activities and any negative impacts in the global south. Their activities consequently came under increased scrutiny against mounting evidence of corporate malpractice, human rights abuses and environmental pollution. In response, foreign corporate activities in the global south became subject to heightened standards and new regulations, governance and control regimes, which '… marked the start of a shift from business as an unintentional actor in development to becoming an actor in intentional development' (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014, p. 24).

Academic and practitioner debates on how and whether to use private actors in and for international development tend to be biased towards either critical or instrumental perspectives (Mosse, 2013), respectively taking the form of a normative discussion of whether this melange is inherently good or bad, or with issue-specific concerns relating to operationalisation and efficiency (Bull, Bøås, & McNeill, 2004). Instrumental perspectives may also involve critical works, but these tend towards assessments of whether the stated instrumental goals have been achieved or not, and does not critically engage epistemic concerns or question the normative objectives (Fabre & Straub, 2023). The instrumental perspective sees the role of private actors in terms of rational problem solving, where private actors will help 'unlock' and 'catalyse' larger flows of private finance for development. Involving private actors is seen to help push conventional aid to be more data driven and result oriented. Moreover, since private actors are seen as more flexible and responsive to local concerns, they help dismantle traditional donor trusteeship and conditionality approaches (Kumar, 2019). Critical views work from the opposite assumption in taking private actors' own interests as the starting point. Such views comprehend private actors' involvement in development as a matter of gaining moral credibility and the legitimizing veneer of being associated with the development work, and that the other motives are access to new emerging markets and cheap labour costs (Dolan & Rajak, 2016).

National and global private actors' involvement in international development is not a new phenomenon (Altenburg & von Drachenfels, 2006; Schulpen & Gibbon, 2001). There is a rich literature on e.g. private sector-led development, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate community development (Banks, Kuir-Ayius, Kombako, & Sagir, 2013; Dolan & Rajak, 2016; Gardner, Ahmed, Bashir, & Rana, 2012). Public–private development partnerships take different forms, dependent on the type of development and private actors involved, funding modalities, reason for and objective of the partnership, amongst others (Romero & Van Waeyenberge, 2020; Hart et al., 2021). The conventional version, often logged under the PPP acronym but of which there is no formal and shared definition (Wang & Ma, 2020) refers to long-term agreements between a government and a private partner, whereby the private partner delivers and funds public services using a capital asset, sharing the associated risks (Bayliss & van Waeyenberge, 2018). This model is commonly found in large infrastructure projects but has more recently been applied to international health projects (Storeng, de Bengy Puyvallée, & Stein, 2021). What is new in the emerging aid regime is the means and objectives to address and involve the private sector in development aid – that private actors increasingly operate in the name of development, as active development agents and in partnership with established development actors. This has brought forward new development dynamics and partnership relations. In many ways, the private sector and official development aid represent worlds apart, representing different epistemic regimes with distinct logics: the private sector is profit oriented and accountable to shareholders and investors; development actors are not-for-profit and accountable upwards to funding agencies and downwards to beneficiaries. These differences produce other material and practical distinctions related to governance, as the private sector is exempted from development aid's governing principles relating to who can give and receive aid, what qualifies as aid, and how aid programming should be done and for what purpose. These differences not only become tangible but may also get amplified when encountering each other, as represented by the many interface situations produced by public–private partnerships in international development.

3. Interfaces in public–private development encounters

Fostering greater collaboration between public and private actors in the name of development brings forward particular discursive encounters and nexuses between different actors with distinct institutional logics, mandates and rationales. To explore such discursive formations, encounters and contestations in practice, this article employs the interface concept as conceived of in the works of Norman Long. The interface concept belongs to the realm of knowledge sociology and draws attention to what happens when different knowledge systems and epistemic communities coalesce, as rendered by actors. Long defines a situation of interface as 'the critical point of intersection between different lifeworlds, social fields or levels of social organization, where social discontinuities based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledges, and power, are most likely to be found' (Long, 2001, p. 243). Interface is a constituent part of any battlefield of knowledge (Long and Long 1992) in pointing to the '… notion of multiple realties and arenas of struggle where different life-worlds and discourses meet' (Long, 1992, p. 271), as indeed is the case with development partnerships involving public and private actors. Interface conveys an advantageous analytical entry-point to grasp how different situated social knowledge intersects, and how discontinuities between different knowledge systems yield struggle between or over knowledge in attending to how '… actors' goals, perceptions, values, interests and relationship are reinforced or reshaped' (Arce & Long, 1992, p. 214). The outcome of interface situations cannot be explained solely with reference to structural determinants or dominant power formations inherent to international development. The concept draws on a relational notion of power, where power imbalances and thus the outcome of interface situations are inherently empirical, context dependent and framed by actors themselves in their practical encounter.

The interface concept fits squarely with the processes involved in the emerging public–private aid regime, and there are different analytical and methodological aspects warranting using the interface concept. First, at the methodological level, the interface concept gives attention to the practical encounter between different actors and thus helps to identify and highlight issues of contestation and diverging interests as rendered by actors themselves. Second, interface studies verge methodologically on the extended case study (Evens & Handelman, 2006), which is a form of situational analysis that takes crisis and contestation – that is, situations of interface – as the analytical starting point. This enables the researcher to identify processes and epistemic regimes, and trace actors' networks and relations as they extend out from the particular cases, thus seeking to infer generalisations and to locate everyday life in its extralocal and historical context (Burawoy, 1998). Third, interface studies privilege, but is not limited to, actor-oriented approaches to understand the intersection of various knowledge regimes and what transpires from such encounters as seen from the perspective of the involved actors themselves. As Rossi reminds us, one should not compartmentalize the life-worlds of actors involved in interface situations, that one should '… think less in terms of interfaces between different worldviews and more in terms of positioned strategies and perspectives' (Rossi, 2006, p. 29). Lifeworlds and systems of knowledge are context specific configurations, where some may be shared, others coexist or mix, some clash, while other retreat into themselves. This opens for analysis of various context specific dynamics related to power, but also how actors in situations of interface may produce counterworks and countertendencies (Wertheim, 1965), which may involve processes of translation and brokerage (Lewis and Mosse 2006) as a way for actors to navigate, manipulate or appropriate diverging interests.

Juxtaposing public and private sectors, actors and interests in international development is far from new, as are the interface situations such initiatives and relations produce. As the empirical sections below show, previous dissonance and contestation between these realms still linger in contemporary policy formation, in current practice and when operationalized at the project level where private entities and publicly funded aid agencies are committed to collaborate for joint projects in so-called strategic partnerships. Exploring such strategic partnerships in terms of interface draws attention to the sociology of knowledge in the encounter of different epistemic regimes: private actors' market-driven logic and accountabilities towards shareholders and investors' interests are fundamentally different from the due diligence processes, principles, and standards of the publicly funded aid regime. Here, the interface concept draws attention to how individual and collective actors, public and private, vie over influencing the partnership and its project formation, thus seemingly making the 'strategic partnership' akin to a 'battlefield of knowledge' (Long and Long 1992; Lie, 2012) where situations of interface become tangible, where actors seek to overcome their differences for a joint result but also how these differences yet again are amplified in and by the partnership itself.

Interface situations are context dependent and get their particular dynamics, so how they unfold and what they may result in are contingent on the actors involved. Therefore, they need to be studied in their particularities, where the interface situation constitutes a point of departure for an extended case study. The empirical section below gravitates around the practical formation of a 'strategic partnership' in Ethiopia between a Norwegian NGO and a multinational company. It starts, however, with how global policies pertaining to public–private partnership in international development made its imprint in Norwegian aid policy through the formation of a government funded strategic partnership programme to facilitate such partnerships – which the practical interface situations of public and private actors end up undermining.

4. Including private actors to Norwegian public aid

Governments who signed onto the 2030 Agenda, as Ethiopia and Norway, are expected to help realising the agenda and its bold SDGs, illustrating how global policy trickles down to individual states. In Norway, the 2017 White Paper on development policy states that the 'private sector is a driver of development' and that the government will 'promote effective models for public–private cooperation so that aid can be used to trigger private sector investments',[1] clearly mirroring the tenets of the SDGs. This new policy did, however, not emerge without contestation from affected development actors, notably the vast NGO community.

In preparing the White Paper, the government held two town hall meetings to consult the civil society organisations, to receive their input and concerns, and to respond to their request for a thorough review of the government's aid policies.[2] In particular, the double-role of the Minster of Foreign Affairs, now also acting as Minister of Development, had caused concern among the NGO-community, which saw this as yet another step by the conservative government to blur the distinction between national interests mediated by foreign affairs and the presumably altruism of development aid. In the first town hall meeting, the NGO community was invited to raise their concerns. Queuing up, it all became fairly predictable, as everyone voiced their own interests: the Norwegian Refugee Council talked about refugees and humanitarianism; Save the Children about children's rights; the Rainforest Foundation about deforestation, and so on. The list went on in quite predictable manners, as recognised by ministry and NGO representatives alike.

The second meeting took a different turn. Ending the previous meeting, the minster expressed he would like to reconvene the civil society to explore the concept of partnership, inviting NGOs to illustrate novel and diverse forms of partnership in recognition of SDG 17, which is the SDG that most clearly promotes public–private partnership. Instead of all the NGOs again lining up to voice their view on private sector collaboration, the ministry asked all NGOs wanting to say something about partnership to pose written questions in advance, arguably because the ministry could then facilitate a more focused and orderly consultation. Instead of only having questions and NGOs raising their own concerns again, the ministry's White Paper secretariat requested examples of good partnership practices, especially 'innovative partnership practices, particularly those involving cooperation with the private sector and geared towards job creation', as one NGO representative told afterwards. Corollary, after an initial dialogue, screening and cherry-picking by the ministry, a select group of NGOs were invited to present their 'innovative partnerships' with private actors, ranging from the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO) and a solar power producer, to a florist and small-scale honey producers. In hindsight, several NGO representatives phrased the town hall meeting as a charade, orchestrated by the ministry to showcase support for ongoing policy processes. The event thus had an immediate symbolic effect, connecting existing practices with larger policy shifts and future ambitions to enhance the private sector role in Norwegian aid. It pointed to ongoing policies, in particular the recent government report on 'Working together. Private sector development in Norwegian development cooperation',[3] which emphasised similar policies as what was now being presented by the NGOs as 'innovative partnership'. It also pointed ahead to the White Paper and its emphasis on what was now recast 'innovative private sector cooperation' and to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), which swiftly responded by establishing a grant scheme for 'strategic partnership for strengthening framework conditions for the private sector'.[4]

5. A project formation based on strategic concerns

The White Paper was adopted 5 April 2017. Already in June 2017, the Development Fund (DF), a Norwegian NGO, submitted a proposal to Norad's first call under its new strategic partnership grant scheme in support of a technical and vocational training (TVET) college in Ethiopia.[5] The proposed strategic partnership brings together diverse actors in terms of sector, scope and size, it has an institutional set-up distinct to the conventional donor–recipient relationship where the latter typically is the implementing partner, and it does not accrue from the conventional participatory, bottom-up approach inherent to the nominal partnership concept. DF is the applicant and managing partner of the strategic partnership, the German GIZ is already at the level of the concept paper subcontracted as the implementing partner,[6] the Abala TVET institution holds the role as recipient partner and object of the intervention, and Yara Dallol, a sub-branch of the Norwegian based multinational fertilizer company Yara International, is the private actor that warrants the public–private strategic partnership label.

The context is that Yara is on the verge of establishing a potash mine in Dallol, in the inhospitable Danakil Depression of the Ethiopian Afar-region, following an extensive exploration phase and positive feasibility studies suggesting the potential for a profitable mine for a period up to three decades. Potash – or potassium – is a natural resource used to produce sulphur of potash, which is a premium fertilizer product. To have the mine operational, Yara is expected to invest about USD 1 billion, and the production capacity will be about 600.000 tonnes annually, which amounts to about ten per cent of the global market (Lie, 2022). The mine is Yara's own project, but it needs qualified labour to realise it, which is the rationale for applying for a college renovation project under the strategic partnership programme.

According to the call, Norad would undertake an initial screening and based on a competitive selection process, a few would be invited to further develop the concept paper into a full-fledged partnership project proposal.[7] DF was among the successful applicants, since which I have followed the formation of the project and the various partners it brings together across scales and sectors (civil society, private and public sector) in Ethiopia and Norway. The process soon materialised into a project called 'Technical & vocational training in Abala, Afar Region of Ethiopia', in short: the Abala TVET project. 7 November 2017 DF's general manager tweeted from Ethiopia 'together for job creation for youths in Ethiopia. Strategic partnership with Yara',[8] rejoinded by Yara's president and CEO tweeting 'great team, great people, great results. True collaboration between civil society, public & private sectors'.[9] These tweets and the contract signing came in conjunction with the Norwegian Crown Prince Couple's official state visit to Ethiopia. Accompanied by a huge business delegation eager to sign contracts, the Crown Prince reiterated at numerous occasions the official Norwegian policy in stating that:[10]

> We are now eager to develop new partnerships and opportunities in trade and business.[11] Norwegian companies are increasingly interested in the opportunities Ethiopia has to offer.[12] This visit will give Norwegian companies an opportunity to share experience and engage with Ethiopian businesses, and perhaps to form new partnerships in one of the most promising markets in Africa.[13] We also discussed, Mr President, at the signing ceremony we just witnessed, that the next major area of cooperation and partnership between our countries will be private sector engagement.[14]

Indeed, with the presence of the crown prince and the Ethiopian premier, Yara's president signed the USD 731 million mining agreement with the Ethiopian government.[15] The agreement lasts for 20 years with the option for renewal for another ten, opening for large scale potash production in the Afar regional state and the construction of a fertilizer factory. While Yara initially wanted to export the raw material, the Ethiopian government insisted on refining the product locally, before export, in order to create more jobs and gain more foreign revenues replenishing its depleted foreign currency reserve. The Ethiopian regime has historically been reluctant to foreign private investments, rather preferring its own state driven enterprises. The combination of domestic political shifts, a need for the big monies to realise larger infrastructure projects and to diversify its export oriented sectors have made the government more susceptible to new and external actors, including private investments as witnessed by the Ethiopian Ministry of Finance's new PPP guidelines (MoF, 2018; Lie & Mesfin, 2018; Dereje, 2011). In return, the government has committed to construct a 130 km grid line, financed by an African Development Bank-loan, to connect Dallol onto the highland grid system to provide electricity for factories and villages in Afar. Moreover, together with a Chinese contractor, the government is renovating the 900 km road to Djibouti to facilitate the more than 60 lorries that daily will bring potash to the Port of Tadjoura for export to the global market. However, for the mining project to move from the exploration to the production phase, two central measures need to be in place. First, the central Yara board needs to approve the mining project and the heavy financial investments it requires. Pending this, and second, qualified labour to build and manage the mine need to be ensured. It is estimated that about 1000 skilled workers are required at the peak of the construction phase, which is a challenge: Dallol is the hottest inhabited place on earth and very remote, and thus unlikely to attract outside workers. The area is scarcely populated with 98 per cent of the woreda's 84000 inhabitants living in rural areas and 82 per cent of the population above five years have never attended any form of school.[16] Expanding the pool to recruit workers from is paramount to realise the mine and thus a key motivation for Yara's involvement in the strategic partnership.

Immediately after Yara signed the mining agreement with the Ethiopian government, the strategic partnership agreement with the Development Fund, Yara and the Abala TVET institution was approved and signed by Norad, also in the presence of royal, governmental diplomatic and private sector dignitaries (Lie, 2022).[17] The project and partnership bring together Ethiopian and Norwegian public, private and civil society interests and actors, and connects the big potash mine investment with the smaller development intervention of about USD 30 million in 'nearby' Abala, the largest settlement in the area and the regional administrative hub of Afar's Zone 2 of which Dallol, 100 km away, is part.

Afar, a regional state in the Ethiopian federation, is roughly the same size as Ireland, scarcely populated (estimated population of 1,8 million in 2017) with a predominant pastoralist population. Lying in the lowlands, Afar is culturally, economically and politically marginalised from and by the dominant highland areas. Abala is situated just down the escarpment, only an hour's drive from Mekelle, the capital of the neighbouring, highland Tigray region. The Abala village has grown into a small city with approximately 10000 inhabitants since my first fieldwork there in 2002 (see Lie, 2019, 2022). Despite a growing economy and bustling commercial activities owing to improved roads and highland connections, it remains a marginal place, lacking basic infrastructure and services. As elsewhere in Ethiopia, also Abala faces rapid urbanisation with soaring unemployment rates caused by an influx of highlanders, sedentarisation of pastoral people and people from neighbouring villages relocating to the city, while the younger generation calls for better education and job opportunities.

This constitutes some of the context of what initially appears as a fairly conventional development project: renovating an abandoned training school into a proper Technical and Vocational Training (TVET) college to provide vocational training to local youth. I first visited the college in early 2018 together with most project partners, receiving a guided tour around the college's compound to witness the limited facilities and broken buildings in dire need of renovation as they have been idle since the boarding school was decommissioned years ago due to lack of state funding. Both the infrastructure and the college's academic and administrative capacities need to be upgraded to fulfil the national standards required of a TVET college, which became the task of the strategic partnership project.

5.1. The formation of a strategic partnership

Talking with the different project stakeholders at the various levels of the aid chain – from donors to recipients, managers to implementers and beneficiaries, spanning the public, private and civil society sectors in Norway and Ethiopia – there is little consensus as to how the project came into being, who and where the idea emanated from. The only common denominators when inquiring about the project narrative and its inception is, first, the absence of any participatory, bottom-up process as per the nominal partnership version; second, that the college renovation would not have been proposed without Yara's need for qualified labour for its potash mine, and; third that the process went unprecedented fast arguably because Norad wanted to use Yara's involvement as a beacon for its strategic partnership programme. As such, the project and the partners it brings together never accrued from any direct local initiative from the college nor any of the involved development agencies.

When Yara realised that the potash mine project would be feasible and profitable, it started to screen the labour market only to realise that the nearest hub to recruit enough qualified labourers from would be Mekelle in the highland some four hours' drive away. Recognising the reciprocal resentment between highland Tigreans and lowland Afaris, as well as the former's challenge to adapt to the remote, desolate and environmental hardship of Dallol, Yara not only feared a too high turnover rate. It also reasoned that importing labour would undermine the mine's local legitimacy and fuel the resentment between the two ethnic groups (Lie, 2022). Assuming its corporate social responsibility, with a commitment to build local capacities, Yara opted for educating people locally rather than recruiting workers from afar. Searching for training institutions, they found the abandoned school in Abala, only 100 km away and along the main road towards the site of the potash mine in Dallol. Assessing the college and its premises, Yara realised the need for upgrading it to fill its own needs and standards. Education and college renovation are, however, not only beyond Yara's scope but also belong to the public realm in Ethiopia. Consequently, Yara reached out to the Norwegian embassy in Addis Ababa to request its support.

Representatives of the Development Fund (DF), the embassy and Norad all recall being approached by Yara pitching the idea of renovating the college. The embassy, highly supportive of the mining project, was 'immediately keen on making this happen', as expressed by one of its representatives, since the project would not only benefit Norwegian private interests abroad, but also tick off many development priorities shared by Ethiopian authorities, such as job creation and education. Moreover, it also overlapped with the evolving Norwegian development policy increasingly zooming into private sector development and strategic partnerships with the private sector. What was being proposed thus had a seductive fit with ongoing discursive shifts at the centre of Norwegian aid policy, but to qualify as a strategic partnership and to receive money Yara would have to involve someone eligible to both receive official development assistance and do projects in the education sector.

Corollary, Yara reached out to DF, which was the only Norwegian NGO with experience from working in the area. Initially, DF representatives were somewhat sceptic about partnering with Yara. Not only would the proposed education project be far off its institutional scope of small farmers and food security. It could also mean being conducive to the interests of a multinational company and risk being associated with any negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts, at the same time as its watchdog role could be undermined by the strategic partnership. Increasingly convinced of the limited physical, social and environmental footprints expected caused by the closed-pit potash mine, DF eventually decided to get involved in the project. The initial scepticism soon converted into excitements in working with a huge multinational actor, as this would directly connect the proposed development intervention with larger socio-economic processes. Moreover, it would also mean responding positively to Norwegian aid authorities' emphasis on strategic partnerships with the private sector.

The proposed college renovation includes infrastructure development and educational capacity building, which is far beyond DF's core competencies in small farmers and food security. To overcome the lack of competence in technical and vocational training and infrastructure development of educational institutions, DF was compelled already at the level of planning to reach out to GIZ as its subcontracted, implementing partner tasked with most of the practical aspects of the project – from renovating the college's infrastructure to assist and build capacity among the college's academic and administrative staff. Despite GIZ's instrumental role, it is not part of the 'strategic partnership' but rather listed in a more diminutive manner as a 'collaborative' or 'implementing partner' together with the Abala college itself. The public–private strategic partnership is thus between DF and Yara.

5.2 A strange partnership of firewalls and proxies

The narratives regarding the Abala TVET project formation and its public–private strategic partnership bring attention to some important concerns, particularly when these narratives are compared with the project's formal representation as rendered via project documents. These concerns, moreover, are caused by the intentional interface produced by the strategic partnership, and thus contribute to undermine the partnership itself.

Partnership in the traditional sense means a reciprocal relationship, between donor and recipient institutions, based on common objectives drawing on the active involvement of beneficiaries and institutions at the receiving end. The above case demonstrates a lack of bottom-up, participatory processes in the project formation. That does not necessarily imply that the project includes bad intentions, that there is no need for the intervention or that it is ineffective – all of which is beyond the scope of this study. Not accruing from the bottom through participatory processes does not mean the project emerged through a top-heavy, donor-driven approach. Rather, as demonstrated by the above narratives, the project and the partnership it eventually would build on initially emerged outside of the conventional aid relation. The project was initially proposed and pushed for by Yara first and foremost to serve its interests: to improve the college for it to expand the pool from which it can recruit a sufficiently, qualified workforce to build and run its potash mine. Yara is also explicit that the project serves its overall corporate social responsibility in helping to build legitimacy and goodwill among the local population, as well as national and regional authorities. In proposing the project idea to the embassy and Norad officials, Yara – maybe coincidentally – tapped into their ongoing policy processes to promote public–private development cooperation and contribute in orienting Norwegian aid towards business developments and job creation (see Lie, 2022). This confluence of interests was thus instrumental to move ahead with the idea and to fast-track establishing the strategic partnership. DF, Yara's strategic partner and owner of the college project, was largely reduced to managing and being accountable for a project it never really asked for, within the vocational training sector it has little experience with, and to balance the needs and interests of all involved stakeholders. More critically to DF, however, especially given it was the only dedicated development actor involved, was how it became complicit in bypassing the established aid programming principles revolving around participatory approaches and local ownership.

Yara's practical role in the project implementation ended up surprisingly miniscule compared to its prominent project formation role. Besides providing in-kind material support for the student dormitories, like beds and mattresses, its role was largely limited to informal activities such as providing students with internship and mentoring programmes, to share experience and give technical advice to the college, as well as the important expectation to provide formal job opportunities to youth once training has been completed. Yara would, however, gradually withdraw even from these activities as the strategic partnership unfolded. Despite the college development project hovered around the prospective potash mine, Yara gradually and further disengaged its formal project role, with one of its representatives asserting 'the necessity to establish impenetrable firewalls between Yara and the college development project'. The main reasons for setting up the firewalls relate exactly to the challenge of strategic partnerships in merging public, civil society and private sector actors and interests. Yara fears being associated with lack of project results and the college's low standards, as this could potentially be detrimental to its reputation and thus consequentially affect its shareholders and investors and their commitment to invest in the potash mine.

Being formally disconnected from project implementation serves to Yara as a firewall preventing liability should anything negative occur in the aid chain, at the college or should the project produce undesired effects. A key concern is the diverging standards between Yara and the college, not only in terms of the quality of training, but also general health, environment and security issues. These differences are immediately felt when visiting Yara's own camp in Dallol, where e.g. security screening and health check are required to enter the gated compound, with its air-conditioned offices and a canteen offering a variety of local and international food – all of which are antithetical to both nearby surroundings and the college itself, which even lacks most of the stuff required to reach the domestic college standard. These differences are also experienced by college students, who are all enchanted by Yara's standards and facilities, giving them more munition to criticise its own college.

Despite formally disengaging itself from the project, Yara, operating informally from behind the firewalls, remains committed to what the project seeks to accomplish. Staff regularly consult with the other project partners and occasionally visit the college to assess status and progress, and to provide guidance and advice. Again, the different standard become tangible, as e.g. the college's lack of electrical earthing is seen as a security hazard and the lack of curtains in the dormitories is interpreted as the college administration being culturally insensitive to students' privacy, particularly female Muslim students. Interestingly, where the private actor appears to not negotiate the standards, the aid agencies are more lenient, agreeing on their importance but argue to prioritise other concerns. Asking why Yara can't pay to fix these minor issues, given its investment budget is thirty times the size of the Abala TVET project, I am again reminded about Yara's disentanglement from the project and the 'impenetrable firewalls' between its potash mine and the strategic partnership project. So, while Yara gradually withdrew from the project, DF continued to manage it in accordance with the funding agreement and its dual accountability to both Norad and beneficiaries. Yara's withdrawal and DF's continuation of the project not only epitomised the distinct logics of public and private actors in the development domain. It also provides a case showing how a publicly funded strategic development partnership project became a proxy for private sector interests, not necessarily because of the actors' bad intentions or competing interests. Rather, it is an effect of the intentional interface of public and private logics, which despite their incommensurability are juxtaposed by the policy agenda promoting public–private development partnership.

6. Competing logics in the development interface

Involving private sector actors to the domain of publicly funded development assistance constitutes one of the more dominant, normative trends of international development since the adoption of the SDGs. Indeed, private actors are seen as key to realise the SDGs by virtue of attracting the big monies needed to finance the audacious development goals, and for offering greater flexibility, competition and relevance to static, public aid. However, if we reorient the analytical focus from contracts and policy papers to practice – to explore how relationships work in practice and what happens in the practical encounters of public and private actors – a more nuanced picture of the promises and perils of public–private development cooperation emerges. The case differs from traditional notions of PPP – understood as the outsourcing of public tasks to private actors or the use of public guarantees to attract private actors to international development. Yet, it is part of the same normative, policy agenda. The case thus adds to our understanding of the practical dynamics unfolding between public and private actors in development, irrespective of PPP notion, but where 'development' constitutes a particular distinct logic informing the partnership. The interface concept (Long, 1989) helps draw empirical and analytical attention to what occurs in the practical encounter between different actors in attending to the intersection of their diverging lifeworlds, interests, knowledges and power. The interface concept draws attention to the contextual dynamics and contestations of the strategic partnership outlined above, showing how it constitutes an evolving knowledge battlefield where distinct public and private logics make their imprint and thereby undermine the PPP policy that initially brought them together.

The initial project formation saw the interface of different actors with distinct logics and diverging interests, where the NGO, which had signalled no prior interest in the project or its strategic partnership, ended up being the project's managing partner. This is a result of planning and sequencing, in the sense that funding authorities saw the public–private partnership itself as more important – to kick-start and showcase its new strategic partnership programme – then what it was nominally intended for. This gained momentum, first, by the private actor reaching out to Norwegian authorities for support, and second, by the upcoming state visit to Ethiopia that included a huge Norwegian business delegation tapping into both countries' recently adopted public–private policy ambitions. The red carpet was largely set for a public–private development partnership, and by adding the NGO it qualified as a strategic partnership enabling using public aid money in support of private initiatives.

The initial confluence of interests among authoritative actors made the project formation and decision phases unprecedented fast, in effect leapfrogging established participatory and competition mechanisms internal to development and private actors respectively, thereby undermining their respective key features. Market competition and the institution of competitive tender processes are central to how the private sector operates, but these were absent in the strategic partnership formation. Similarly, development aid draws on a particular rationale and programming practices that also were absent in the process. The concepts of local ownership and participation are central to how development assistance is planned and implemented, having the objective to secure local involvement, safeguard do-no-harm principles and ensure that external aid interventions are sensitised to local contexts. In the case above, however, policy authorities' interest to realise the strategic partnership programme and demonstrate its new aid mechanisms were, in the interface with established development principles, given priority over and thus challenging these established aid mechanisms. Due to the multiple interfaces of public and private actors and interests, the formation of the strategic partnership and its project became an externally, top-driven endeavour that not only bypassed but also challenged established aid principles of participatory and inclusive bottom-up approaches to planning and implementation. Consequently, the project emerged from the top, reflecting donor and private interests, and not local knowledge, actors and beneficiary perspectives.

The interface perspective shows how the strategic partnership orchestrated the interface of different actors with distinct logics, interests and rationale that proved hard to reconcile in practice. In many ways, actors pertaining to the private and development sectors represent discursive worlds apart: The private sector is profit oriented and accountable to its shareholders and investors. Development agencies, on the other hand are not-for-profit and subject to a double accountability regime: upward accountability to its funder and downwards accountability to its target groups and beneficiaries. These differences, which were not addressed when planning the strategic partnership and project, gradually surfaced in the practical project implementation. The private actor steadily disengaged itself from the project and the partnership due to its concerns over implementation, management and standards of both the project and the college. The gradual withdrawal came with the parallel erection of 'impenetrable firewalls' between the private actor on the one hand, and the publicly funded project and NGO on the other. This was described as crucial reputation management, or risk mitigation activities, as representatives of the private actor feared that its investors and shareholders would withdraw financial and boardroom support if the private actor became associated with the low college standards, lack of project progress or any potential project failure. However, while the private actor withdrew due to its institutional logic and accountability regime, the NGO maintained its responsibilities because of its accountability to its funder but also to the college itself. As such, the strategic partnership – which continued at the formal policy level but not in practice – and the college, which continued to receive support for its renovation, ended up as a publicly funded proxy for private sector interests. In epilogue, both the potash mine and the college projects were running separately until late 2021, when civil war erupted in northern Ethiopia which caused the NGO to pull out of the college project and the private actor to sell out of its mining project.

7. Conclusion

Despite the global policy push to promote public–private development cooperation, such partnerships produce idiosyncratic situations. This article has shown how a publicly funded development project becomes a proxy for private interests – even after the private actor practically withdraws from public cooperation – not because of conflicting objectives but because of their distinct rationale and institutional logics. As such, the article demonstrates how actors put together as part of the PPP agenda end up undermining PPP itself because of the interface situations created in the nexus of public and private actors.

The normative public–private partnership agenda positions the private sector as an active development agent operating in partnership with established development actors. This article has moved analytical attention beyond this agenda, to explore the level of practice, to see how relationships work in practice, not on paper. By attending to situations of interface involving public and private actors' interests and logics, the article demonstrates how new forms of public–private partnerships emerge in the development domain and their potential transformative and consequential effects for the meanings, processes and mechanisms of international development beyond the case itself. It argues that public and private actors in development represent distinct logics and interests that are not only hard to reconcile in practice but also potentially in conflict to each other: private actors' market-driven logic and accountabilities towards shareholders and investors are fundamentally different from publicly funded international development's due diligence processes, principles, and standards. Such institutional differences shape the interface situations, where different actors vie over influencing the structure and content of partnership. One effect, although context dependent, is how established aid principles, meant to secure public interests and beneficiary perspectives, are not only being eschewed but also undermined by private actors and interest. Moreover, as demonstrated in this article, the fundamental institutional differences between private and development actors may also cause their cooperation to produce publicly funded development projects operating as proxies for private sector interests.

Notes

1. Meld. St. 24 (2016–2017) Report to the Storting (white paper) English summary (regjeringen.no),
2. The meetings were held November 10, 2016 and January 31, 2017.
3. Private sector development in developing countries – regjeringen.no.
4. Elsewhere also referred to as 'Cooperation on framework conditions for private sector development in the South'.
5. The empirical case, as outlined under this and the next heading, draws heavily on previously published material (see Lie, 2022). While the core content of the case material is alike, the current version has been reworked and expanded, in order to fit the new theoretical and analytical frameworks of this article. A reference to Lie (2022) has been inserted where there are clear text and content overlaps.
6. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeid (GIZ) is a German development agency that mainly implements technical cooperation projects for the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. It also works with other governmental organisations, the private sector, and – less frequently but as the present case is an example of – with non-governmental organisations.
7. In the original call, it said that up to five concept papers would be selected. However, having received 78 concept proposals, Norad moved on with 20 concept ideas. See https://norad.no/en/tilskudd/tildelinger/stor-interesse-for-strategiske-partnerskap/.
8. My translation. See https://twitter.com/parta/status/927895264840638466. Accessed April 26, 2023.
9. See https://twitter.com/stholsether/status/927933393530183680. Accessed April 26, 2023.
10. The below quote is a composite of various official statements given during the state visit, all of which are referenced in the.
11. Statement at reception hosted by the Norwegian ambassador to Ethiopia. See www.royalcourt.no/tale.html?tid=159179&sek=28409&scope=27248 Accessed November 6, 2019.
12. Statement at state banquet in Addis Ababa. See www.royalcourt.no/tale.html?tid=159147&sek=28409&scope=27248 Accessed November 6, 2019.
13. Statement at opening of 'Partnership and business for sustainable solutions' seminar. See www.royalcourt.no/tale.html?tid=159138&sek=28409&scope=27248. Accessed November 6, 2019.

14. Statement given after meeting Ethiopia President Mulatu Teshome. See www.royalcourt.no/tale.html?tid=159129&sek=28409&scope=27248. Accessed November 6, 2019.
15. Ethiopia signs mining agreement with Yara International. See http://ethemb.se/ethiopia-signs-mining-agreement-with-yara-international/. Accessed November 6, 2019.
16. Woreda roughly translates to district, and is the most central local administration unit in the bureaucratic hierarchy in Ethiopia. Each woreda is composed of several kebelles, or neighbourhoods. Figures taken from the 2007 census report, available at www.csa.gov.et/census-report/complete-report/census-2007. Accessed 11. November 2019.
17. https://www.bistandsaktuelt.no/nyheter/2017/yara-med-gruve-i-etiopia/.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Kathleen Hancock, Paul Beaumont and especially the two anonymous referees for great comments on previous versions. Please note that large parts of the empirical case material found under the subheadings ‘A project formation based on strategic concerns’ and ‘The formation of a strategic partnership’ have previously appeared elsewhere (see Lie, 2022).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This is written as part of the ‘Public–Private Development Interfaces in Ethiopia’-project funded by the Research Council of Norway, grant no. 315356.

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